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Revelation and the *Left Behind* Novels

CRAIG R. KOESTER

In one cataclysmic moment, millions around the globe disappear. Vehicles, suddenly unmanned, careen out of control. People are terror stricken as loved ones vanish before their eyes,” and as “devastating as the disappearances have been, the darkest days may lie ahead.” These words, which appear on the back cover of the novel *Left Behind* by Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, helped launch one of the most successful fictional series of recent decades.¹ In the pages of the *Left Behind* books, readers encounter insidious schemes in the United Nations, conspiracies to take over the world’s economy, threats of global terror, and subplots tracing the lives and loves of the heroes and heroines—all unfolding to a biblical beat. Having sold tens of millions of copies, the twelve novels in the series have shaped the way many think about Scripture, the Christian faith, and the future. If devotees often embrace the novels uncritically, critics frequently dismiss them out of hand. Therefore, our task here is to consider the theological and biblical basis of the novels and the nature of their appeal, to offer a critique of their approach, and to ask what mainline churches might learn from this phenomenon.

¹The first novel in the series is *Left Behind* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1995). The twelfth volume is *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days*, published in 2004. Volumes cited in this article include *Tribulation Force: The Continuing Drama of Those Left Behind* (1996) and *The Mark: The Beast Rules the World* (2000).

The Left Behind novels appeal because they affirm God’s control of history in the face of violence and moral decay. Our challenge is to be more biblical than Left Behind, not less biblical—to hear Revelation’s call to persevere in the face of evil and to trust in the final victory of God and the Lamb.

UNDERSTANDING *LEFT BEHIND*

Most people assume that the *Left Behind* novels simply follow the message of the book of Revelation, and the popular press reinforces this impression by dubbing the authors “The New Prophets of Revelation” (*Newsweek* cover, May 24, 2004). The novels, however, are actually based on a theological system that was developed in the early 1800s by a British writer named John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), who wove verses from various parts of the Bible into a scenario of the coming end of the age. His views were popularized in the study notes that Cyrus Scofield included in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, first published in 1909. Later, Hal Lindsey’s *The Late Great Planet Earth*, which appeared in 1970, linked the biblical texts used in Darby’s system to current newspaper headlines, giving readers the impression that Scripture had predicted the dominant political trends of the Cold War. The *Left Behind* novels, which began appearing in 1995, present Darby’s system through the medium of fiction.

“one key assumption of this system is that biblical prophecy is ‘history written in advance’”

One key assumption of this system is that biblical prophecy is “history written in advance” (*Left Behind*, 214). Scripture is understood to foretell coming events, so that what believers now read about in the Bible, the general public will eventually read about in the newspaper (*Tribulation Force*, 175). The catch is that no single book of the Bible contains the entire script, and verses from various parts of the Bible must therefore be joined together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle so that people can see the whole picture. The result is a theological system known as premillennial dispensationalism. The term “dispensationalism” refers to the idea that all of time can be divided into separate periods known as dispensations. The present dispensation spans the time between the first and second comings of Christ, and the next great dispensation will be the millennium, the thousand-year period of peace on earth in which Israel is supposed to be foremost among earth’s nations. Since the authors of *Left Behind* insist that Christ must return *before* the millennium begins, they are called *pre-millennialists*.²

The system assumes that the dominant line of biblical prophecy must be fulfilled in the national history of the Jewish people. A key passage is Gen 15:18, which promises Abraham’s descendants a kingdom that will stretch “from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.” Dispensationalists recognize that the Old Testament tells of Israel establishing a kingdom in Canaan, but insist that after the Jewish people rejected Christ in the first century A.D., God temporarily stopped ful-

²By way of contrast, those who expect Christ to return after the millennium are postmillennialists and those whose eschatological systems do not include a millennium are amillennialists. See Stanley J. Grenz, *The Millennial Maze: Sorting Out Evangelical Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1992).

filling his promises concerning the land. A church made up largely of Gentiles came into existence, but dispensationalists believe that in the future the church will be mysteriously taken up to heaven. Once this occurs, God will fulfill his promise to establish Israel's dominance among the nations. Because of this perspective, dispensationalists are keenly interested in discerning how the modern state of Israel might be a sign of the end times.

A passage that dispensationalists use to determine God's timeline is Dan 9:20–27, which describes a period of seventy weeks of years (a "week" of years equals seven years). According to the system, all but one of these seven-year periods elapsed prior to the time of Christ. Then, in the first century A.D., after Jesus had been crucified and the Romans had destroyed the temple, God stopped the clock of prophecy with just one seven-year period remaining. God's action can be compared to that of a referee at a basketball game, who stopped the clock with just seven seconds left. People have gone about their activities for the past two thousand years much as players and spectators do during a time-out in a basketball game, waiting for the clock to start so that the game can be played out. This means that all of time from the first century to the present lies in the gap between Dan 9:26 and 9:27.

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The signal that the clock of prophecy is about to start moving again is expected to be the rapture, which refers to Christians being caught up to heaven. The idea is not derived from Revelation but from 1 Thess 4:17, where Paul speaks of Christ returning and believers being caught up to meet him in the air. Most interpreters understand that Paul refers to Christ's second coming at the end of time, but proponents of Darby's system insist that Paul speaks of Christ returning to snatch the faithful up from the earth *before* the beginning of the great tribulation that will conclude this phase of history. In the novels those who are raptured vanish bodily, leaving only unbelievers and halfhearted Christians to face the horrors of the tribulation. Dispensationalists point out that the word "church" appears often in Rev 1:1–3:22, then it vanishes until 22:16. Just as the word vanishes, they argue that the church itself will vanish during the tribulation. Although Revelation refers to "saints" being afflicted on earth during the tribulation, the *Left Behind* view is that these "saints" are people who come to faith *during* the tribulation, not those who had sincere faith before it.

A central figure during the tribulation is expected to be a world leader known as the antichrist (1 John 2:18), the man of lawlessness (2 Thess 2:3–4), and the beast (Rev 13:1–8). In the novels the antichrist is Nicolae Carpathia, a talented politician from Romania, who uses visions of global peace and harmony to manipulate the

United Nations into creating a world government under his control. By enticing nations into adopting a unified monetary system, the antichrist also positions himself to dominate the world's economy. All people wishing to conduct business transactions will be forced to use the mark of the antichrist, which includes the number 666 (Rev 13:18). Some have assumed that the number will be something like a credit card number or the universal product codes, but the *Left Behind* novels picture the antichrist injecting a biochip under every person's skin (*The Mark*, 204–205).

A new global religion will support the antichrist's policies. This new religion is the great harlot of Rev 17:1–18, whose agents will seduce and compel people into joining the Global Community of Faith. Blending the elements of all religions into one ideology, people will be expected to profess, "God is in all and above all and around all. We are God" (*Tribulation Force*, 275). Since Rev 17:9 pictures the harlot on seven hills, recalling the seven hills of Rome, dispensationalists have usually linked the apostate religion with Roman Catholicism and its blending of belief systems with the World Council of Churches, the precursor to the harlot. The removal of true Christians from earth through the rapture opens the way for a rapid expansion of this new faith, although God does provide those left behind with an opportunity to learn the truth by sending two prophets to bear witness in Jerusalem (11:1–13). These prophets, named Moishe and Eli in the novels, will convert 144,000 Jews to Christianity (7:1–8; 14:1–5), and this group will bring innumerable people of other nations to faith (7:9–17; *Left Behind*, 325, 346).

The tribulation is expected to last for seven years, the final "week" of years mentioned in Dan 9:27. During its first half, Israel will make a diplomatic covenant with the antichrist, thinking that this will provide the peace and security needed to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem (*Left Behind*, 353). After three and a half years, however, this will prove to be a "covenant with death" (Isa 28:15) that will bring a "time of trouble for Jacob" (Jer 30:7), for the antichrist will double-cross the Jews by defiling the temple and making true sacrifice cease (Matt 24:15; Dan 9:27).

The battle of Armageddon is expected to conclude the tribulation. Dispensationalist writers offer varying scripts for the battle, depending on how they piece together biblical texts. The *Left Behind* authors expect the armies of the antichrist to assemble at Armageddon, the place of Megiddo in northern Israel (Rev 16:12–16; cf. Joel 3:9–11). Early in the conflict the city of Babylon is destroyed (Isa 13–14; Jer 50–51; Rev 17–18), Jerusalem falls (Mic 4:11–5:1; Zech 12–14), and the antichrist's armies gather at Bozrah east of the Jordan River (Jer 49:13–14; Mic 2:12). At this point, however, God restores Israel (Ps 79; Isa 64; Hos 6), and Christ returns to battle God's enemies from Bozrah to the Valley of Jehoshaphat near Jerusalem (Isa 63:1–3; Jer 49:20–22; Joel 3:12–13; Zech 14:12–15), where he makes a victory ascent on the Mount of Olives, leaving carnage on the battlefield (Joel

3:14–17; Zech 14:3–5; Rev 19:11–21). After this, the millennial kingdom can begin (Rev 20:1–6).³

THE APPEAL OF THE *LEFT BEHIND* SYSTEM

The view of the future presented above appeals to many because it affirms that God is sovereign despite ominous world conditions.⁴ Tapping into a deep sense that the present age is sliding inexorably into violence and moral decay, the *Left Behind* novels offer help in coping with a world in which weapons of mass destruction can annihilate civilization, while advances in communications and computer science aid networks of global terror and make surveillance and manipulation of public opinion more feasible for those in power. In the face of these threats, *Left Behind* assures readers that God’s purposes will be carried out, step by step, according to the script that has been pieced together from various verses of Scripture. If war seems inevitable, the prophets warned that war would come. The uninitiated may think that the world is spinning out of control, but the faithful can see things unfolding according to God’s plan.

“Left Behind assures readers that God’s purposes will be carried out, step by step, according to the script that has been pieced together from various verses of Scripture”

The novels also provide for personal salvation. God may have determined that the world must undergo devastating events, but individuals can change their own futures by coming to faith. Those who accept the Christian message now will be raptured up to heaven and escape the horrors of the end times. People cannot change the world, but they can believe in God and they can try to bring others to faith in the hope that many will be spared. The world situation is like that of a coastal city that has been warned of the approach of a major hurricane. Forecasters can see that the storm will progress along a certain path, which will not change. Therefore, they warn residents to move quickly to safety before the storm hits. The coming of the storm is inevitable, but only those who stubbornly ignore the warnings must experience its fury.

A theme in *Left Behind* is the victory of the common Christian over the secular elites that dominate public life. The novels show that simple believers, who know the biblical script, are far better informed about global developments than the commentators on television. Readers who identify with the main characters find it appealing to have inside knowledge of God’s activities, while watching the

³See Tim F. LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, *Are We Living in the End Times?* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1999) 228–229; Tim F. LaHaye, *Revelation Unveiled* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 255–256; Tim F. LaHaye and Thomas Ice, *Charting the End Times* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2001) 63–64.

⁴See the analysis in Paul Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More: Prophecy Belief in Modern American Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992) 293–324.

would-be experts showing that they are clueless about the meaning of events like the disappearance of millions of believers from the world. The overly educated are duped by the forces of evil, while the simple believer sees the truth.

Finally, the theological system used by the novels invites speculation about the future but allows people plenty of room to alter their views as situations change. Outlining their approach in their book *Are We Living in the End Times?* LaHaye and Jenkins reject setting dates for Christ's return, but insist that "our generation has more reason than any before us to believe that He [Christ] could come in our lifetime" (23–24). When they wrote the book in 1999 they speculated that Saddam Hussein "could well be" the forerunner of the antichrist (142), but since this was only a suggestion, the name of another global villain can easily be suggested later. Similarly, after recounting how technology has moved us toward a cashless society in which the mark of the antichrist can be used for commerce, the authors say, "All this means that there is nothing from an economic or technological standpoint to hinder the Rapture from occurring at any time" (204). Such comments raise expectations without making claims that can easily be disproven by events. Using the fictional form of the novel for the *Left Behind* series allows even greater flexibility, since the stories simply show what the end *might* look like.

PROBLEMS WITH THE *LEFT BEHIND* SYSTEM

The theology presented in the *Left Behind* series has often been critiqued, and here we will focus on several points.⁵ One is that the authors define prophecy as "history written in advance," but Revelation does not do so. If the whole book of Revelation is "prophecy" (Rev 1:3; 22:7, 10, 18, 19), then prophecy is more than foretelling events. For example, the messages to the churches in Rev 2–3 include condemnations of sin, calls for repentance, and words of encouragement. The warnings that are given are not simple predictions of coming disasters, but are issued in conditional form, so that the threat will only be carried out if repentance does not occur (2:5, 16; 3:3); and the promises are not so much predictions as expressions of God's commitment to bless those who "conquer" (2:7, 10–11, 17, 26–28; 3:5, 12, 20–21). Similar warnings and promises appear elsewhere, as do prophetic pronouncements of salvation and blessing (14:13; 19:9; 22:7).

Revelation's criterion for authentic prophecy is whether the prophet's message promotes faithfulness to God or leads people away from God. For example, a woman nicknamed "Jezebel" is considered a false prophet, not because she spoke wrongly about the future, but because she encouraged people to eat what had been sacrificed to idols (2:20). Similarly, a figure personified as a beast is called a false prophet because he encourages false worship, not because he makes erroneous predictions (13:11–18; 16:13–14; 19:20). By way of contrast, true prophets include the

⁵For other critiques, see Bruce Forbes and Jeanne Halgren Kilde, eds., *Rapture, Revelation, and the End Times: Exploring the Left Behind Series* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Barbara Rossing, *The Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2004).

two witnesses, who are dressed in sackcloth, implying that their function is to call people to repentance. Nothing is said about their ability to predict the future (11:3).

Revelation's peculiar structure also challenges the idea that it is history written in advance. Interpreters have long noted that Revelation speaks of God's future triumph but does not outline events in a linear sequence. For example, when the seven seals are opened, disasters threaten the earth until the sun becomes black, the stars fall, and the sky vanishes (6:12–14), yet the sky, sun, and stars quickly come back so they can become dark all over again in 8:12 and 16:10. Scenes alternate between earth and heaven with dizzying speed, sometimes looking ahead to the deliverance from tribulation (7:14) and sometimes looking back to the fall Satan that leads to tribulation (12:12). The novels deal with the problem by rearranging biblical passages as needed. For example, Revelation does not mention the two prophetic witnesses until the middle of the book (11:3–10) and does not connect them to the 144,000 (7:4–8), but the witnesses appear in the very first novel in the series, where they actually convert the 144,000 (*Left Behind*, 325, 346).

Second, the dispensationalist system patches together parts of Scripture in a way that alters the meanings that verses had in their original contexts. For example, the system maintains that God fulfilled prophecies up to Dan 9:26, then stopped the clock for at least nineteen centuries. Next, God is to fulfill 1 Thess 4:17 by rapturing the faithful; then, he is to resume the script at Dan 9:27 as the tribulation begins. When read in context, however, Dan 9:26 and 27 clearly speak of the same period of time, not of events separated by two millennia. Similarly, inserting the verse about the saints being caught up in the air from 1 Thess 4:17 into Rev 4 alters the meaning of the rest of the book: instead of calling the whole church to persevere in the face of affliction, the chapters after Rev 4 warn of the tribulations that only those left behind after the rapture must face. The central element becomes the hope of escape from the world by means of the rapture rather than a summons to faithful witness.

Finally, the system insists that biblical prophecies must be taken literally, but it applies this principle selectively. For example, one of the characters in the novels begins explaining the vision of the four horsemen this way: "If you have ever been exposed to such imagery and language before, you probably considered it only symbolic," clearly implying that the text is to be taken literally. One of the listeners accepts this approach, realizing, "Not long ago he would have scoffed at such teaching, such a literal take on so clearly poetic and metaphoric a passage," but no longer. Soon, however, the speaker adds, "Let me clarify," asking, "Who is the first horseman? Clearly he *represents* the Antichrist and his kingdom. His purpose is 'conquering and to conquer.' He has a bow in his hand, a *symbol* of aggressive warfare" (*Tribulation Force*, 65, 71, italics added). While insisting that the text is to be taken literally, the authors recognize that the vision is not about literal horsemen. The issue is not whether Revelation uses symbolism but how one should interpret it.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

Those who find the *Left Behind* series unappealing usually have little trouble dismissing its message, but the phenomenal popularity of the novels challenges critics to provide a compelling alternative. Questions about God, faith, and the future of the world persist, so if one does not adopt the approach of these novels, what are other options? The dominant method, favored by those trained in biblical scholarship, is to relate Revelation's message to its historical context. This approach rightly assumes that Revelation would have made sense to the readers it first addressed. Since the book begins, "John to the seven churches that are in Asia" (Rev 1:4), modern readers should ask how the Christians in those seven churches would have understood it. The strength of the historical approach is the way it disciplines interpretation by its attention to the ancient context. The problem is that focusing on the ancient context can make Scripture seem remote from issues of faith and life today—the issues that are so important to readers of *Left Behind*.

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Weekly worship is a natural place to consider what Revelation might mean for faith and life, but the *Revised Common Lectionary* selects only six short passages from Revelation to be read in public. These include the opening and concluding greetings from God and Christ as the Alpha and Omega, together with four scenes of the saints in glory. These texts are read during the Sundays after Easter, once every three years, and occasionally on All Saints Day or Christ the King Sunday. The Sunday lectionary completely avoids the beast and the harlot, and steers a wide passage around the seven seals and other plague scenes. Some rather stern warnings do interrupt the greetings at the end of Revelation, but these are conveniently omitted from the assigned reading so that worshipers do not hear them.⁶ The result is a pleasant selection of texts that will not disturb or confuse anyone. The problem is that the omitted passages are precisely the ones that generate the most interest.

The challenge is to be more biblical than *Left Behind*, rather than less biblical, and to read Revelation theologically as well as historically, taking seriously the questions people ask about God and the future.⁷ Revelation's visions are expansive enough to include a God who can threaten as well as assure, and who confronts the forces of evil as well as encouraging the afflicted. The God envisioned by many

⁶The assigned texts for the Sundays after Easter in series C are Rev 1:4–8; 5:11–14; 7:9–17; 21:1–6; 21:10, 22–22:5; 22:12–14, 16–17, 20–21.

⁷See Craig R. Koester, *Revelation and the End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001); Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1993).

modern readers is tame by comparison. John's visions do not provide a step-by-step guide to future events, but disclose a clash between the power of God and the forces of evil that was real for the book's first readers and remains real for people today. Exploring Revelation as a whole, rather than ignoring it or remaining within the confines of a few pleasant passages, is not easy, but it is not supposed to be. Revelation calls readers to a faith that perseveres in the face of evil, confident in the victory of God and the Lamb. ⊕

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